DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 447 FL 016 746

AUTHOR Cheshire, Jenny
TITLE A Survey of Dialect Grammar in British English.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 10p.; In: Blanc, Michel, Ed.; Hamers, Josiane F., Ed. Theoretical and Methodological Issues in the Study of Languages/Dialects in Contact at Macro- and Micro-Logical Levels of Analysis; see FL 016 743.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Descriptive Linguistics; Dialect Studies; Foreign Countries; *Grammar; Language Research; *Language Variation; *Nonstandard Dialects; Oral Language; *Regional Characteristics; Research Methodology; Secondary Education; *Syntax
IDENTIFIERS *English (British); Language Awareness; Language Contact

ABSTRACT

A three-year research project which will collect information on the grammar of British dialects is described. The project is part of a larger study of syntactic variation, undertaken to gain insight into the causes of and solutions to linguistic conflict in school. Information is to be gathered in selected schools from the speech of students 11-16 years old and supplemented with responses to questions about parental and grandparental speech. Interest is focused on common features or community usage rather than individual usage. Analysis of the data will permit charting of the distribution of a wide range of grammatical features of British English, development of an atlas of British dialect grammar, and identification of specific regions where more detailed studies of syntactic variation could be carried out most usefully. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
A. Pruyser
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED282447

A SURVEY OF DIALECT GRAMMAR IN BRITISH ENGLISH

Jenny Cheshire
University of London

Résumé / Abstract

Cette communication présente un projet de recherche financé par l'ESRC (Conseil de la Recherche en Sciences Economiques et Sociales) qui durera trois ans de 1986 à 1989 et sera basé à Birkbeck College. Cette enquête a pour but l'analyse de données sur la grammaire des dialectes de l'anglais, données qui seront recueillies par des enseignants et leurs élèves dans des projets de classe sur le dialecte local. L'information sur la grammaire dialectale est importante pour des raisons descriptives et théoriques. Elle est importante également sur le plan éducatif pour les locuteurs des parlers anglais non-standard, qui forment la plus grande partie de la population. Les membres de l'équipe collaboreront avec des chercheurs d'autres pays européens qui travaillent aussi sur les implications pour l'éducation des différences dialectales.

1. Introduction

This paper will describe a 3-year research project which will begin in January 1986 in the Department of Applied Linguistics at Birkbeck College, financed by the Economic and Social Research Council. The project is still at the planning stage, and we would welcome comments on the methodology or an any other aspect of the research.

The project forms part of a wider research programme which aims to analyse variation in language, particularly syntactic variation. At present there are three strands to the research programme, not all of which are equally well developed. We will briefly discuss each strand in turn, and then give a description of the research project.

2. Theoretical aspects of the analysis of syntactic variation

In order to maintain the analytical precision that has been achieved in the study of phonological variation, it would clearly be desirable for the concept of the linguistic variable to be used at higher levels of analysis. There has been some controversy in the literature concerning the feasibility of this (for example, LABOV 1978; LAVANDERA, 1978; ROMAINE, 1981; WEINER and LABOV, 1983). One purely practical problem in attempting to analyse syntactic variation within a quantitative framework is that, in contrast to phonological

FL016746

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

variables, syntactic variables are unlikely to occur with sufficient frequency in any given sample of recorded speech. There are other problems, however, of a more theoretical nature, that have not yet been resolved (see CHESHIRE, forthcoming). For progress to be made in these theoretical issues, there is an urgent need for information on the type of linguistic structures that are involved in syntactic variation. Although there has been a considerable amount of research into syntactic variation in spoken French (for example, the work on the vernacular French of Quebec carried out at Laval University, and the work on Montreal French) there has been very little research into syntactic variation in spoken English.

The survey of dialect syntax that will be described below aims to provide some information of this kind for spoken British English. We hope, therefore, that it will provide a starting point for an informed discussion of syntactic variation in British English.

3. Educational implications of the analysis of syntactic variation

There is considerable variation between standard English syntax and the syntax of the nonstandard varieties of British English. Since the British educational system is based entirely on the assumption that both teachers and pupils will use standard English, a number of problems can be anticipated. First, it is possible that linguistic stereotyping will lead teachers to evaluate dialect-speaking children more negatively than their standard English speaking peers (see J. EDWARDS, 1979; V. EDWARDS, 1979). Secondly, a wide range of bad pedagogic practices are likely to result from inadequate information as to the nature of dialect differences, particularly in the teaching of reading and the correction of children's written work (see V. EDWARDS, 1983; CHESHIRE, 1984).

Clearly a major step in avoiding bad pedagogic practice would be for teachers to become more aware of the nature of dialect differences and of their educational implications. As ROSEN and BURGESS (1980) point out: "The onus is here placed firmly on teachers not only to adopt a positive attitude to dialect, but also to make sufficient effort to learn about the features of dialect to avoid confusing children".

The need for teachers to recognise differences between dialect grammar and standard English grammar has also been given considerable emphasis recently in the DES's pamphlet (1984), which attempts to formulate a consistent language policy for schools. For example, one of the objectives listed for 16-year-old pupils is that they should be aware of the differences between standard English grammar and dialect forms, and use standard English when it is appropriate to do so. However, it seems to us that it is both unfair and unrealistic to place the responsibility for remedying the mistreatment of dialect in school with teachers, when there is no information on dialect grammar available for them to consult.

Again, then, progress on this aspect of syntactic variation is seriously hampered by the lack of information that is available.

4. The nature and the distribution of features of British dialect grammar

From what has been said above it should be clear that information on the nature and the geographical distribution of features of British dialect grammar is essential if the educational problems caused by linguistic conflict in school are to be resolved. Since features of nonstandard English very frequently alternate with the corresponding features of standard English in people's speech, information of this kind may also go some way towards resolving the more theoretical problems that are involved in the analysis of syntactic variation. At the very least, it should allow us to point to those areas of the country where future research into syntactic variation could be fruitfully undertaken. A recent report prepared for the ESRC by EDWARDS, TRUDGILL and WELTENS (1984) surveyed some 200 studies dating back to the beginning of this century and abstracted any information about grammar that was presented either directly or indirectly in the studies. By far the greatest part of this information was derived from discussions of phonology or lexis in which grammar plays only a peripheral role, and the report, in stressing the need for further research into syntactic variation in English, mentioned some examples of linguistic phenomena in British English that are as yet poorly understood (such as, for example, the usage of modal verbs, auxiliaries and semi-auxiliaries). We intend to use the data that will be obtained from the survey to enable us to locate the precise areas of the country where these linguistic phenomena occur.

The survey is not, then, intended to be simply a data gathering exercise, although the gathering of data will inevitably form a major part of the survey. Some other ways in which the data will be used will be mentioned in Section 5.3. First, however, we will describe the methodology to be used in the survey.

5. Methodology

As mentioned in Section 2, a practical difficulty involved in the analysis of syntactic variation is that if analyses are based on recorded speech, as ideally they would be, it is unlikely that the variables under investigation will occur with sufficient frequency, even if specific attempts are made to elicit them. The methodology that we have devised aims to overcome this difficulty, whilst at the same time serving an educational purpose.

We propose to collect information on dialect grammar by working with teachers and their pupils. Such an approach has a wide range of advantages. There is a growing awareness in British schools (more so in some parts of the country than in others) of the educational potential of linguistic diversity, which includes recognition of working-class children's nonstandard dialects (see ROSEN and BURGESS, 1980; V. EDWARDS, 1983; OPEN UNIVERSITY, 1985). A project which focusses on dialect will therefore be likely to receive a sympathetic

reception from a broad cross-section of teachers. Teachers are clearly in contact with young people of all social backgrounds and in all parts of the country. It is thus organisationally feasible to locate large numbers of potential participants who fulfill the various selection criteria which are necessary for the project.

Working with young people of school age does, of course, preclude any study of age stratification of grammar. However, the data that we collect will reflect the current usage of an important proportion of the population and will be a useful counterbalance to the more usual practice of restricting surveys to older informants (see, for instance, ORTON ET AL., 1978). We will supplement information on young people's usage by asking questions about parental and grandparental speech, though obviously this information will need to be treated with caution.

An undertaking of this kind will necessarily be a collaborative effort between teachers and pupils. This approach to learning departs significantly from the traditional mode, but it is by no means novel or unique, and collaborative learning techniques have attracted a considerable following in recent years. We believe that these techniques are important for a project which centres on non-standard language, for two reasons. First, many teachers will not come from the region in question or will themselves be standard English speakers, so that they will need to call upon the expertise of their pupils. Treating pupils as experts is in accordance with the approach adopted by, for example, RALEIGH (1981), in the Language Book, which is a book designed for use in the classroom:

> "Everyone who reads this knows much more about language than can be put in a book. Everyone has managed the amazing job of learning at least one language in so many different ways that even one is a lot. So you're the expert; make sure you tell the others what you know about language and the ways it works".

Secondly, it is essential that discussions of linguistic diversity are handled with care and sensitivity, in order to avoid alienating speakers of nonstandard varieties of English. The material in the ILEA English Centre's (1979) booklet on Dialect and Language Variety, for example, which is designed for use with school children, has been criticised for adopting an 'us' and 'them' approach which does nothing to help those children who have to choose between in-group loyalty and educational participation (see MERCER and MAYBIN, 1981). If dialect is investigated as a joint project, with the pupils seen as the experts, this will not only provide an excellent opportunity for collaborative learning, but will also help to ensure that the topic is treated with the necessary tact and respect.

Finally, collaborative projects are essential for ensuring the reliability of children's responses. Reports of self-usage are notoriously unreliable. We will ask teachers and pupils to discuss the use of the various features as a group, and to respond to questions on community usage rather than on individual usage. We have made preliminary attempts to use this approach with Reading children, where we already have detailed information on local dialect usage and can therefore assess the reliability of pupils' responses. These attempts have been very successful. It would seem that the normative pressures of the group counteract the tendency of individual speakers to deny nonstandard usage (EDWARDS, forthcoming, reviews several studies which appear to have produced reliable results using this approach).

Our intention is to focus on children in the 11-16 age range. Although it has been proposed that sociolinguistic sophistication is seldom fully acquired before adulthood (see LABOV, 1966), it is now understood that even very young children are linguistically aware and are able to discuss linguistic difference in overt terms (see, for example, WILES, 1981; DAY, 1982; ROMAINE, 1984). We would therefore anticipate that young people in this age range would be reliable in their judgements.

5.1 Pilot study

The first stage will be to set up a pilot study, using our existing teacher contacts in four different areas of the country — South Wales, Reading, Peterborough and Manchester. Draft materials will be prepared to be tested by these pilot groups. The materials will include an introductory text, which will provide background information for the teacher, together with suggested topics for class discussion and a checklist of dialect features to be completed by teachers and pupils together. The materials will include requests for information on local sources of written dialects. For instance, there are newspapers in the West Country and in the West Midlands that have a column or cartoon strip in the local dialect. It will be useful to locate this information for the eventual preparation of resource lists for teachers.

During the pilot stage of the project a number of visits will be made to selected teacher groups to discuss the materials and to obtain first-hand information on any problems in their design.

5.2 The main study

Once the results of the main study have been evaluated, teacher contacts will be extended.

Our aim, at present, is to draw on about 400 schools. Although approximately 80% of the population live in cities, we will aim for approximately equal numbers of urban and rural catchment areas, rather than for a representative sample. This will allow us to sample the full range of dialect diversity and also to study questions pertaining to rural-urban interaction. We intend to fill in any gaps in national coverage by contacting schools and HMI's directly.

Each teacher will be asked to work with approximately 25 children. We will require information which will allow us to identify deviant participants, such as those who have moved to the area in recent years, and children whose parents come from different parts of the country or from abroad. We will also ask children to provide their postal codes. In this way we will be able to identify the enumeration district in which they live and to build a social profile for the children in a given school.

5.3 Analysis of the data

Analysis of the data will allow us to chart the distribution of a wide range of grammatical features of British English. We hope to produce a short Atlas of British Dialect Grammar, using the facilities of the Geography Department at Birkbeck College. We hope, too, that once the Survey has been completed we will have obtained a good understanding of the type of material on linguistic diversity that will be of most use as a classroom resource, so that we can begin to provide books and other resource materials that will be suitable for teachers to use with their pupils.

In addition, we expect that the data that we obtain will enable us to identify specific geographical regions where detailed studies of syntactic variation could most usefully be carried out — where, for example, features of particular linguistic interest are most likely to occur. They will, at the very least, allow us to build up a far fuller picture of the dialect grammar of those areas that up to now have received little or no attention. We may well be able to make a useful contribution to the controversial question of dialect levelling. Some writers have claimed that dialect diversity is reducing, and being replaced not simply by standardization but by a development towards a levelled nonstandard dialect. We will also be able to provide some information on the grammatical differences between urban and rural dialects. EDWARDS ET AL. (1984) note that investigations of more socially homogeneous rural and semi-rural areas would redress the current balance of research and might well yield important information on the possible interaction between urban and rural dialects. Although it is unlikely that the Survey will provide sufficient data from rural areas to address these questions directly, it should point to those areas of the country where detailed sociolinguistic analyses of rural-urban interaction could most profitably be pursued.

6. Collaboration with European colleagues

Although there is considerable interest in language awareness programmes in British schools (see STUBBS and HILLIER, 1983), no project similar in scope to this Survey has been undertaken to date in Britain, nor, as far as we are aware, in any English-speaking country. This is in marked contrast with Germany and Holland, where the question of dialect differences and their various educational implications has been examined in considerable detail. As a preliminary to the main stage of the Survey, therefore, we would like to consult colleagues in other countries who have already undertaken research in this area, to exchange information and to establish those elements of their research programmes that would be relevant to our project. Bert WELTENS, at the Katholieke Universiteit in Nijmegen, has already indicated an interest in coordinating a Workshop in the Netherlands to which we would invite colleagues from Belgium, Germany and other European countries. We look forward to an exchange of information and ideas, and in the meantime will be extremely interested to have feedback on the methodology of the Survey or on any aspect of the wider research programme.

REFERENCES

CHESHIRE, J. (1984), "Indigenous Nonstandard English Varieties and Education", In P. Trudgill (ed.), *Language in the British Isles*. Cambridge: CUP.

—— (forthcoming), "Analysing Syntactic Variation", *Linguistics*.

DAY, R. (1982), "Children's Attitudes Towards Language", In E, Ryan and H. Giles (eds.), *Attitudes Towards Language Variation*. London: Edward Arnold.

DES (1984), *Curriculum Matters: English 5-16*. London: HMSO.

EDWARDS, J. (1979), *Language and Disadvantage*. London: Edward Arnold.

EDWARDS, V. (1979), *The West Indian Language Issue in British Schools*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

—— (1983), *Language in Multicultural Classrooms*. London: Batsford.

—— (forthcoming), *Language in a British Black Community*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.

EDWARDS, V., TRUDGILL, P., and WELTENS, B. (1984), *The Grammar of English Dialect*. London: Economic and Social Research Council.

ILEA (1979), *Dialect and Language Variety*, ILEA English Centre: Sutherland Street, London, SW1.

LABOV, W. (1966), *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics.

—— (1978), "Where Does the Linguistic Variable Stop? A Response to Beatriz Lavandera", Working Papers in *Sociolinguistics*, 44. Austin, Texas: S.W. Educational Development Laboratory.

LAVANDERA, B. (1978), "Where Does the Sociolinguistic Variable Stop?", *Language in Society*, 7: 171-183.

MERCER, N. and MAYBIN, J. (1981), "Community Language and Education", In N. Mercer (ed.), *Language in School and Community*. London: Edward Arnold.

ORTON, H., SANDERSON, S., and WIDDOWSON, H. (1978), *The Linguistic Atlas of England*. London: Croom Helm.

OPEN UNIVERSITY, (1985), *Every Child's Language*. Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters.

RALEIGH, M. (1981), *The Languages Book*. ILEA English Centre: Sutherland Street, London, SW1.

ROMAINE, S. (1981), "On the Problem of Syntactic Variation: A Reply to Beatriz Lavandera and William Labov", Working papers in *Sociolinguistics*. 82, Austin, Texas: S.W. Educational Development Laboratory.

—— (1984), *The Language of Children and Adolescents*. Oxford: Blackwell.

ROSEN, H. and BURGESS, T. (1980), *Languages and Dialects of London Schoolchildren*. London: Ward Lock Educational.

STUBBS, M. and HILLIER, H. (1983), *Readings on Language, Schools and Classrooms*. London: Methuen.

WEINER, E.J., and LABOV, W. (1983), "Constraints on the Agentless Passive", *Journal of Linguistics*, 19 (1): 29-58.

WILES, S. (1981), "Language Issues in the Multicultural Classroom", In N. Mercer (ed.), *Language in School and Community*. London: Edward Arnold.